

Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on: The Reader

Author: Bernhard Schlink

Born: July 6, 1944, in Grossdornberg, Bielefeld, Germany; Education: Ruprecht Karl University, J.D., 1975; Albert-Ludwigs University, Privatdozent, 1981; Addresses: Office: Humboldt University, Unter den Linden 6, D-10099, Berlin, Germany. Phone: 030 2093-3472; Fax: 030 2093-3452 E-mail: schlink@rewi.hu-berlin.de.

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Born: 1944
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Career:

Judge, legal educator, and novelist. Member of German Bar; Constitutional Court, Nordrhein-Westfalen, Germany, justice, 1988-2006. Rheinische Friedrich Wilhelms University, Bonn, Germany, professor, 1982-91; J.W. Goethe University, Frankfurt, Germany, professor, 1991-92; Humboldt University, Berlin, Germany, professor, 1992-. Consultant in legal field.

Awards:

Grinzane Cavour Prize, 1997; Prix Laure Bataillon, 1997; Fisk Fiction Prize, *Boston Book Review*, 1998; Die Welt, 1999; Heinrich Heine Prize, 2000; Chevalier, Ordre de la Légion d'Honneur, 2001.

Writings:

Fiction:

(With Walter Popp) *Selbs Justiz* (novel), Diogenes (Zurich, Switzerland), 1987, translated by Rebecca Morrison as *Self's Punishment*, Vintage Books (New York, NY), 2005.
Die gordische Schleife (novel), Diogenes (Zurich, Switzerland), 1988.
Selbs Betrug (novel), Diogenes (Zurich, Switzerland), 1992, translated by Peter Constantine as *Self's Deception*, Vintage Crime/Black Lizard (New York, NY), 2007.
Der Vorleser (novel), Diogenes (Zurich, Switzerland), 1995, translated by Carol Brown Janeway as *The Reader*, Pantheon Books (New York, NY), 1997.
Liebesfluchten: Geschichten (short stories), Diogenes (Zurich, Switzerland), 2000, translated by John E. Woods as *Flights of Love: Stories*, Pantheon Books (New York, NY), 2001.
Selbs mord (novel), Diogenes (Zurich, Switzerland), 2001.
Die Heimkehr (novel), Diogenes (Zurich, Switzerland), 2006.
Das Wochenende (novel), Diogenes (Zurich, Switzerland), 2008, translated by Michael Henry Heim, as *Homecoming*, Pantheon Books (New York, NY), 2008.

Nonfiction:

Abwägung im Verfassungsrecht, Duncker & Humblot (Berlin, Germany), 1976.
Die Amtshilfe: Ein Beitrag zu einer Lehre von der Gewaltenteilung in der Verwaltung, Duncker & Humblot (Berlin, Germany), 1982.
(With Bodo Pieroth) *Grundrechte, Staatsrecht II*, C.F. Mueller (Heidelberg, Germany), 1985, 23rd edition, 2001.
(Editor, with Arthur J. Jacobson) *Wiemar: A Jurisprudence of Crisis*, translated from the German by Belinda



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Cooper and others, University of California Press (Berkeley, CA), 2000.
(With Bodo Pieroeth and Michael Kniesel) *Polizei-und Ordnungsrecht*, C.H. Beck (Munich, Germany), 2002, fourth edition, 2007.
Vergangenheitsschuld und gegenwärtiges Recht, Suhrkamp (Frankfurt on the Main, Germany), 2002.
Vergewisserungen Über Politik, Recht, Schreiben und Glauben, Diogenes (Zurich, Switzerland), 2005.

Media Adaptions:

Abridged and unabridged versions of *The Reader* were adapted for audiocassette, read by Campbell Scott, Random House AudioBooks, 1999.

Further Readings:

Periodicals:

Bloomsbury Review, January 1, 1998, review of *The Reader*, p. 21.
Booklist, August 1, 1999, review of *The Reader*, p. 2025; September 15, 2001, Donna Seaman, review of *Flights of Love: Stories*, p. 196; March 15, 2005, Frank Sennett, review of *Self's Punishment*, p. 1270; December 15, 2007, Ian Chipman, review of *Homecoming*, p. 25.
Books, summer, 1998, review of *The Reader* (audio version), p. R5.
Bookseller, December 7, 2001, "Affairs of the Heart," p. 34.
Chronicle of Higher Education, December 7, 2001, Julia M. Klein, review of *Flights of Love*, pp. 18-19.
Economist, June 13, 1998, review of *The Reader*, p. 16.
Entertainment Weekly, January 18, 2008, Missy Schwartz, review of *Homecoming*, p. 86.
Globe and Mail, April 17, 1999, review of *The Reader*, p. D17.
Kirkus Reviews, September 15, 2001, review of *Flights of Love*, p. 1319; May 1, 2007, review of *Self's Deception*; November 15, 2007, review of *Homecoming*.
Library Journal, June 1, 1997, p. 153; May 1, 1998, review of *The Reader*, p. 168; September 15, 2001, Barbara Hoffer, review of *Flights of Love*, p. 115.
New Republic, March 23, 1998, review of *The Reader*, p. 33; October 15, 2001, Ruth Franklin, "Immorality Play," p. 54.
New Statesman, January 9, 1998, review of *The Reader*, p. 44; January 28, 2002, Martyn Bedford, "A Moral Maze," p. 54; July 30, 2007, Yo Zushi, "Age and Reason," p. 60.
Newsweek International, November 12, 2001, Andrew Nagorski, "A World in Shades of Gray," p. 61.
New York Review of Books, March 26, 1998, review of *The Reader*, p. 4; January 17, 2002, Louis Begley, "Lonely in Germany," review of *Flights of Love*, pp. 16-17.
New York Times, August 20, 1997, Richard Bernstein, review of *The Reader*, p. B7; January 19, 2002, Steven Erlanger, "Postwar German Writer a Bard of a Generation," p. A4.
New York Times Book Review, July 27, 1997, Suzanne Ruta, "Secrets and Lies," p. 8; September 30, 2001, Jennifer Schuessler, "Happiness Doesn't Make Them Happy," p. 6; October 7, 2001, review of *Flights of Love*, p. 26; September 9, 2007, Charles Taylor, "A Good German," p. 13; January 13, 2008, Liesl Schillinger, "Aptitude for Destruction."
Observer (London, England), August 16, 1998, review of *The Reader*, p. 16.
Publishers Weekly, June 2, 1997, review of *The Reader*, p. 51; April 9, 2007, review of *Self's Deception*, p. 31; October 15, 2007, review of *Homecoming*, p. 37.
Quadrant, May, 1999, review of *The Reader*, p. 85.
Review of Contemporary Fiction, spring, 2002, Brian Evenson, review of *Flights of Love*, pp. 142-143.
Salmagundi, fall, 1999, review of *The Reader*, p. 3.
Spectator, February 23, 2002, Carole Angier, review of *Flights of Love*, pp. 36-37.
Times Literary Supplement, December 4, 1998, review of *The Reader*, p. 12; February 15, 2002, Kathleen Bogan, "Pressures of Peace," p. 23.
Tricycle, summer, 1999, review of *The Reader*, p. 94.
Virginia Quarterly Review, winter, 1998, review of *The Reader*, p. 22.



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Wall Street Journal, October 5, 2001, Gabriella Stern, review of *Flights of Love*, p. W13.
Washington Post, October 28, 2001, Rick Whitaker, "Divided Hearts," review of p. T03.
World Literature Today, autumn, 1996, Ulf Zimmermann, review of *The Reader*, p. 951; winter, 2001, Jeffrey Adams, review of *Liebesfluchten*, pp. 147-148.

Online:

Tennessean, <http://tennessean.com/> (February 18, 2008), Craig Seligman, review of *Homecoming*.

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Sidelights:

Bernhard Schlink is a respected judge and professor of constitutional law in his native Germany, but it is as a writer of mystery novels that he became known to the general public. These novels, according to critic Ulf Zimmermann in *World Literature Today*, are "grounded in the realities of past and present Germany." Though he continued to write fiction tying together the past and present of various German characters, with his best-selling 1995 novel *Der Vorleser* the format of his fiction broadened to include stories written outside of the crime genre. Some reviewers noted this change as Schlink's shift to create more literary work, rather than staying focused on the more formulaic crime publications he previously published.

Der Vorleser, translated as *The Reader*, was the first of Schlink's novels to be published in the United States. The novel was received with enthusiasm by *New York Times* critic Richard Bernstein, among others. *The Reader*, which is over 200 pages long and sparsely written, narrates the first-person story of Michael Berg, a young German born during World War II. As a teenager Michael has a passionate sexual affair with Hanna, a woman twenty years his senior, who has helped him recover after an attack of hepatitis fells him on the street. Some ten years later, Michael, now a law student, is an official observer at the trial of a group of former concentration camp guards, among whom is Hanna. He discovers that Hanna, although guilty of some of the crimes attributed to her, is being used as a scapegoat by her fellow defendants who want to pin on her the entire blame for a particular atrocity, the burning of a church with hundreds of Jewish women sheltering inside it. For mysterious reasons that Michael comes to understand but not reveal publicly, Hanna does not disclose a crucial fact that could free her; instead, she goes to prison. Eighteen years later, she is freed, to Michael's discomfort. "What he then learns about Hanna's strivings, the pains she took during her years in prison to achieve moral absolution, is almost unbearably poignant," declared Bernstein.

Hinting at a possible autobiographical element in the novel, Bernstein praised Schlink for crafting *The Reader* with "marvelous directness and simplicity, his writing stripped bare of any of the standard gimmicks of dramatization." The novel, Bernstein wrote, is "a lesson in the mysteriousness of individual lives and in the impossibility for the moral, reflective individual to live free from the entanglements of history." The reviewer quoted, as evidence of the novel's quality, a passage in which Michael, trying both to understand Hanna and to condemn her, finds it impossible to do both at the same time. Remarked Bernstein, "It is a mark of Mr. Schlink's depth and honesty that he makes no effort to resolve [this dilemma]."

Another appreciative review of *The Reader* came from *Library Journal* critic Michael T. O'Pecko, who found the novel "very readable" and the characterization of Hanna "achingly complex." And Zimmermann felt that "Germans of Michael's age will find themselves in singular empathy with the narrator and his tale"; moreover, the reviewer predicted, "the utter artlessness Schlink has given its telling will...likewise completely take in other readers and compel them to unprecedented reflection. Not much fiction on 'mastering the past' has been more powerful and poignant than this unassuming-looking little volume."



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Sidelights continued:

When comparing *The Reader* to Schlink's first collection of stories, 2000's *Liebesfluchten: Geschichten*, Jeffrey Adams commented in a *World Literature Today* review of the latter that both works are evidence of Schlink's transition from writing popular, entertaining mysteries to more literary works of fiction. Yet, noted Adams, both *The Reader* and the stories in *Liebesfluchten*, which was published in English in 2001 as *Flights of Love*, maintain "the twisting plots and surprise endings of the crime genre and the undemanding, straightforward style that makes such an easy read." In addition, described Adams, in both Schlink "plac[es] his characters not only in interpersonal relationships, but also in relation to social reality and the political past." Among seven stories contained in *Flights of Love* is "A Little Fling," which focuses on an East German couple struggling with marital issues that are in part caused by the political actions each has taken: the husband secretly sold intelligence reports to avoid consequences associated with his wife's earlier political behavior. Later, in anger after learning of her husband's earlier actions, the wife has a one-night affair with a West German, who is the narrator of the story.

The interplay between past and present, and the continued effect that certain events and psychological issues have on actions and connections to the world, are common elements explored in the *Flights of Love*. "Girl with Lizard" centers on one man's long-standing fascination with a painting of a girl and a lizard. The painting is from the man's less-than-positive childhood, and upon his father's death, it becomes his most prized inheritance. Through his investigation of the painting and how his father might have acquired it, the man resolves some issues carried from his past. The painting, specifically his fixation on the girl in the painting, also has a significant influence on his real-life relationships with women. *New York Times Book Review* contributor Jennifer Schuessler named this story as one of the collection's strongest.

In her review, Schuessler wrote: "Schlink's tales of botched and betrayed love unfold in a stripped-down prose ...that is pleasingly crystalline when viewed from some angles and simply colorless from others...The strongest stories here—'Girl with Lizard,' 'Sugar Peas,' 'The Other Man'—are striking portraits of men waking up belatedly, if incompletely, to the cost of self-deception and the elusive nature of happiness." "Sugar Peas" was also named by a *Kirkus Reviews* critic as one of the best stories in an uneven collection. "Sugar Peas" portrays an architect in the midst of a midlife crisis. During the story, the man recalls the political ideals he held before beginning his successful career, he realizes his dream of becoming a painter, and he engages in extramarital affairs. The *Kirkus Reviews* critic referred to the stories in *Flights of Love* as "patiently detailed, emotionally complex" and called Schlink "a sober, meticulous craftsman [who offers] plainspoken analyses of the often extraordinary inner dimensions of outwardly ordinary lives."

Schlink returns to a more explicit examination of history and its implications in *Homecoming*. The novel focuses on the quest of protagonist Peter Debauer to find out more about his father, whom he does not remember and who reportedly died during World War II. Debauer discovers the fragments of a novel, plotted much like *The Odyssey*, in which a German soldier makes his way home after being released from a prisoner of war camp. Sensing parallels between this novel's narrative and his father's own story, Debauer sets out to learn whether its pseudonymous author could actually be his father. Some reviewers found *Homecoming* to be less compelling than Schlink's earlier fiction, particularly *The Reader*. *Booklist* reviewer Ian Chipman, for example, felt that the novel's ambitious themes create "far too much ballast to support [the book's] own weight." A writer for *Kirkus Reviews* observed that while *Homecoming* sometimes offers "an absorbing portrayal of a sobering quest for self-knowledge, the novel is redundant, and it drags." A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer, on the other hand, considered *Homecoming* perhaps Schlink's "most powerful and disquieting" novel to date. Describing the book as "sensitive and disturbing," *New York Times Book Review* contributor Liesl Schillinger praised Schlink's honesty and courage in so unflinchingly exploring the question of his character's connection with Nazism.

Schlink's well-received crime novels feature protagonist Gerhard Self, who had served as a public prosecutor during the Nazi era and now, in his late sixties, works as a private investigator in newly unified Germany.



Reading Group Guide (5)

Sidelights continued:

He has managed to come to terms with his past enthusiasm for National Socialism, achieving what he calls, in *Self's Punishment*, an "elaborate balance" of "guilt and atonement, enthusiasm and blindness, pride and anger, morality and resignation" that he hopes will allow him to live his life quietly. But this balance is shaken when the detective is hired by a childhood friend to nab a computer hacker who is interfering with operations at Rhineland Chemical Works. Self attempts to trap the criminal, but things go awry and the hacker is murdered. In the aftermath, Self must face his demons once again. Frank Sennett, reviewing the novel in *Booklist*, praised it as a "fascinating exploration of how people often manage to carve out normal lives even after being complicit in terrible acts."

Self uncovers a massive political cover-up in *Self's Deception*. After agreeing to investigate the disappearance of Leonore Salger, daughter of the government undersecretary, Self is told that the young woman had been a psychiatric patient and had died after falling from a window a week earlier. But the story seems phony. Self keeps looking for more information, only to discover that Leonore has gone into hiding after being connected with a terrorist attack on a U.S. military base on German soil. The government does not want information about the attack getting out; nor is the undersecretary really Leonore's father. A writer for *Publishers Weekly* felt that *Self's Deception* lacks narrative drive, but that Self's eccentricities are so enjoyable that they compensate for a story line that is often "meandering." Charles Taylor, writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, made a similar point. "The novel's mystery is too pokey and convoluted to sustain much suspense or emotional involvement," commented Taylor, but even so, "Self makes for pretty good company."



Reading Group Guide (6)

Spotlight on:
The Reader

Reviews:

New Statesman, January 9, 1998

The Reader. Mundy, Toby

"If only it were all so simple!", Solzhenitsyn once wrote. "If only there were evil people somewhere committing evil deeds and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"

Bernard Schlink's magnificent chiaroscuro novel *The Reader* (Phoenix House, [pounds]12.99) grapples with the legacy of those who carried out the Final Solution to tackle head on Solzhenitsyn's discomfiting question.

Told in part as a rite-of-passage tale, in part as courtroom drama, this highly original contribution to the literature of the Holocaust is also a meditation on the precarious architecture of secrecy. It opens with an account of the intoxicating force of erotic love. Michael Berg, aged 15, embarks on a passionate clandestine affair with Hanna, an orderly, fastidious woman in her mid-thirties, much concerned with cleanliness.

At first their alliance develops conventionally: she bathes him, they make love, they sleep. Later, at her request, he reads to her before they have sex. Michael, like many adolescent boys, believes that women inhabit a secret world, that their movements, thoughts and desires are motivated by some remote and enigmatic principle. Thus the lacunae in Hanna's personal history ("Her life," he declares at one point, "was elsewhere.") serve only to increase her allure.

To sustain his affair, Michael fashions an expanding web of evasion, petty crime and deception. Then one day, without warning, Hanna disappears. It is some years before Michael sees her again. During his law degree course, his seminar group observe the War Crimes trial of a collection of Auschwitz guards charged with murdering more than 200 Jewish women. Hanna is one of the accused. Throughout her amour with Michael, Hanna had something to hide much larger and more terrible than a pubescent lover.

It is easy to see why *The Reader* has been a bestseller in Schlink's native Germany. Written with economy and verisimilitude, it reminds us of the ghostly immanence of the Nazi past in every aspect of postwar Germany. It shows how, without warning, the pressurised mental compartments that hold the secret histories of those who served in the war can be blown open to flood daily life with unimaginable horror. "Monsters," as Michael puts it, "have come grinning out of the patterns on the curtains and the carpet."

Schlink lays bare the agony of Germany's postwar generation without diminishing the profanities perpetrated by many of their parents. In the struggle to understand their crimes, the children of the Reich come up sharp against the guilty feeling that, in doing so, they are somehow failing to condemn. But when they do condemn them, as they know they must, there is no room for understanding. *The Reader* elucidates this dreadful irony without exculpating indifference, cruelty and genocide.



Reading Group Guide (7)

Spotlight on:
The Reader

Reviews continued:

Publishers Weekly, June 2, 1997

Another in the spate of soul-searching post-Holocaust German novels that have made their way here, this elegant if derivative triptych chronicles the relationship of narrator Michael Berg, a young bourgeois man who becomes a legal historian, with working-class Hanna Schmitz, 20 years his senior and (as it turns out) a former SS officer. They meet in the 1950s, when he is 15: she rescues him when he falls ill in the street from the effects of hepatitis. His thank-you visit results in months of trysts; the lovers develop a routine that involves Michael reading aloud from the German classics. Part Two opens at Hanna's trial 10 years later for war crimes: assigned by chance to observe the trial, Michael continues his strange role as her reader, sending her tapes in prison until, in Part Three, the two finally, and tragically, meet again. Some readers may object to Schlink's insistently withheld moral judgments: he never treats Hanna as just a villain. Yet this well-translated novel indisputably offers a philosophical look at the "numbness" that settled over German culture during the war and that (Schlink seems to say) infects it to this day.

Library Journal, June 1, 1997

After falling ill on the street in the German town where he lives, 15-year-old Michael is helped by a woman named Hanna. When he returns to her apartment to thank her several months later, he begins a passionate love affair with her. In time, she demands that he read aloud to her before they make love, and they essay some of Germany's and the world's great literature together. One day, however, Hanna disappears without saying farewell, and Michael grieves and believes it to be his fault. He finds her again years later when, as a law student, he encounters her as the defendant in a court case. To reveal more of the plot would be unfair, but this very readable novel by German author Schlink probes the nature of love, guilt, and responsibility while painting a sympathetic portrait of Michael and an achingly complex picture of Hanna. Recommended for most collections. —Michael T O'Pecko, Towson State Univ., Md.



Discussion Questions (1)

Spotlight on:
The Reader

From ReadingGroupGuides.com

1. At what point does the significance of the book's title become clear to you? Who is "The Reader"? Are there others in the story with an equally compelling claim to this role?
2. When does the difference in social class between Hanna and Michael become most clear and painful? Why does Hanna feel uncomfortable staying overnight in Michael's house? Is Hanna angry about her lack of education?
3. Why is the sense of smell so important in this story? What is it about Hanna that so strongly provokes the boy's desire? If Hanna represents "an invitation to forget the world in the recesses of the body" [p. 16], why is she the only woman Michael seems able to love?
4. One reviewer has pointed out that "learning that the love of your life used to be a concentration camp guard is not part of the American baby-boomer experience."* Is *The Reader's* central theme—love and betrayal between generations—particular to Germany, given the uniqueness of German history? Is there anything roughly parallel to it in the American experience?
5. In a novel so suffused with guilt, how is Michael guilty? Does his narrative serve as a way of putting himself on trial? What verdict does he reach? Is he asking readers to examine the evidence he presents and to condemn him or exonerate him? Or has he already condemned himself?
6. When Michael consults his father about Hanna's trial, does his father give him good advice? Why does Michael not act upon this advice? Is the father deserving of the son's scorn and disappointment? Is Michael's love for Hanna meant, in part, to be an allegory for his generation's implication in their parents' guilt?
7. Do you agree with Michael's judgment that Hanna was sympathetic with the prisoners she chose to read to her, and that she wanted their final month of life to be bearable? Or do you see Hanna in a darker light: do the testimonies about her cruelty and sadism ring true?
8. Asked to explain why she didn't let the women out of the burning church, Hanna remembers being urgently concerned with the need to keep order. What is missing in her reasoning process? Are you surprised at her responses to the judge's attempt to prompt her into offering self-defense as an excuse?
9. Why does Hanna twice ask the judge, "what would you have done?" Is the judge sympathetic toward Hanna? What is she trying to communicate in the moment when she turns and looks directly at him?
10. Why does Michael visit the concentration camp at Struthof? What is he seeking? What does he find instead?
11. Michael comments that Enlightenment law (the foundation of the American legal system as well as the German one) was "based on the belief that a good order is intrinsic to the world" [p. 181]. How does his experience with Hanna's trial influence Michael's view of history and of law?
12. What do you think of Michael's decision to send Hanna the tapes? He notices that the books he has chosen to read aloud "testify to a great and fundamental confidence in bourgeois culture" [p. 185]. Does the story of Hanna belie this faith? Would familiarity with the literature she later reads have made any difference in her willingness to collaborate in Hitler's regime?



Discussion Questions (2)

Spotlight on: *The Reader*

13. One might argue that Hanna didn't willfully collaborate with Hitler's genocide and that her decisions were driven only by a desire to hide her secret. Does this view exonerate Hanna in any way? Are there any mitigating circumstances in her case? How would you have argued for her, if you were a lawyer working in her defense?
14. Do you agree with the judgment of the concentration camp survivor to whom Michael delivers Hanna's money at the end of the novel? Why does she accept the tea tin, but not the money? Who knew Hanna better—Michael or this woman? Has Michael been deluded by his love? Is he another of Hanna's victims?
15. Why does Hanna do what she does at the end of the novel? Does her admission that the dead "came every night, whether I wanted them or not" [pp. 198-99] imply that she suffered for her crimes? Is complicity in the crimes of the Holocaust an unforgivable sin?
16. How does this novel leave you feeling and thinking? Is it hopeful or ultimately despairing? If you have read other Holocaust literature, how does *The Reader* compare? *Suzanna Ruta, *The New York Times Book Review*, July 27, 1997: 8.



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The Reader

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Kits include one bag, 10 books, and a pocket folder of materials. Use this sign-out sheet to keep track of who takes which copy of the book. Groups may keep the folder when returning the books and bag.

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